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AUTHOR Panzarella-Tse, Catherine; Mc Mahon, Pamela M.
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ABSTRACT

Many theories have been proposed to explain the blaming the victim phenomena and to predict who is most likely to engage in this behavior. This study hypothesized that since behavioral blame of a victim is self-protective for an observer, this type of blaming will be evidenced more by those who are personally and situationally similar to the victim than by subjects who are situationally similar but personally dissimilar. The latter were expected to utilize characterlogical blame more than the former. These predictions are congruent with the tenets of defensive attribution theory once the important distinction between behavioral and characterlogical blame is taken into account. Subjects (N=30) were female undergraduate students at St. Bonaventure University (New York) who responded to a vignette describing a rape in the local area, with a victim named either John or Sue providing the gender manipulation. Support was not obtained for the reformulation of defensive attribution theory represented by the proposition that subjects of the same gender as victims would attribute more behavioral and less characterlogical blame to the victim than subjects of the opposite gender. The fact that in all conditions subjects preferred behavioral to characterlogical blame offers a possible explanation for the failure to support the hypotheses. The data yielded a significantly greater attribution to chance for scenarios involving male victims rather than female victims. (LLL)

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Defensive Attribution: A Re-examination Distinguishing Between Behavioral and Characterological Blame

Catherine Panzarella-Tse

Temple University

and

Pamela M. Mc Mahon

Southern College of Technology

CG023713

Running Head: DEFENSIVE ATTRIBUTION

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Author Notes

This proposal summary is an abbreviated version of the first author's Masters Thesis. Research for this study was conducted at St. Bonaventure University (St. Bonaventure, New York) under the guidance of the second author.

The authors are grateful for review and suggestions concerning the full version of this paper from Charles Walker and Carl Wagner of St. Bonaventure University.

Requests for copies should be directed to Catherine Panzarella-Tse who is now at the Department of Psychology, Clinical Division, Weiss Hall, 6th Floor, Temple University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19122.

Pamela M. Mc Mahon is now affiliated with the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at the Southern College of Technology in Marietta, Georgia.

Abstract

It was proposed that since behavioral blame of a victim is self-protective for an observer, this type of blaming will be evidenced more by those who are personally and situationally similar to the victim than by subjects who are situationally similar but personally dissimilar. The latter are expected to utilize characterlogical blame more than the former. These predictions are congruent with the tenets of defensive attribution theory once the important distinction between behavioral and characterlogical blame is taken into account. Multivariate tests of the model did not reach significance. Failure to obtain support for the model and adjunctive findings concerning attributions to chance and a general preference for behavioral blame are discussed.

Defensive Attribution: A Re-examination Distinguishing Between Behavioral and Characterlogical Blame

Many theories have been proposed to explain blaming the victim phenomena and predict who is most likely to engage in this behavior. Although the literature in this area is rife with contradictory theories and findings, Shaver's (1970) defensive attribution theory has engendered a substantial amount of support (Aderman, Archer, & Harris, 1975; Barnett, Tetreault, Esper, & Bistrow, 1986; Fulero & Delara, 1976; Gilmartin-Zena, 1983; Kanekar, Pinto & Mazumdar, 1985; Luginbuhl & Mullin, 1981; Martin, McKean & Veltkamp, 1986; McMahon, 1984; Miller, Smith, Ferree & Taylor, 1976; Shaver, 1970; Shaw & McMartin, 1977). It suggests that people who perceive themselves as similar to a stimulus person who is the victim of some misfortune will blame that person less than people who do not perceive similarity because similar people feel vulnerable to the same fate and wish to avoid potential blame for themselves in the future (Shaver, 1970; Shaw & McMartin, 1977).

However, there are several studies which have either failed to find support for defensive attribution (Fincham & Hewstone, 1982; Kahn et al., 1977), or have found precisely the opposite pattern of blaming behavior (Alexander, 1980; Krulewitz & Nash, 1979). Perhaps the conflicting results in this research area can be explained by a failure to distinguish between behavioral

and characterlogical blame and to consider behavioral blame consistent with the self-protective motives of defensive attribution (Janoff-Bulman, 1979; Karuza & Carey, 1984).

Although a few studies have attempted to distinguish between behavioral and characterlogical blame of a victim, there are several problems with the way these concepts were operationalized which may have contributed to the contradictory findings (Howard, 1984; Kanekar et al., 1985; Luginbuhl & Mullin, 1981).

For example, although Howard (1984) provides partial support for the present reformulation, it appears that she actually only assessed differences in behavioral blame and did not adequately operationalize characterlogical blame. Howard found that males preferred behavioral blame in the male victim stimulus condition but females attributed characterlogical blame more than behavioral blame to a female victim. However, blame for participation in the activities depicted (jogging and hitchhiking) was considered characterlogical rather than behavioral. Janoff-Bulman (1979) and Karuza and Carey (1984) consider similar items behavioral blame and reserve the label "characterlogical" for more general indictments of a person's qualities. Thus, the females in Howard's study may simply have been blaming a different behavior than the males were rather than utilizing a different blame type.

Also, Howard's (1984) crime vignettes may not have been situationally or personally relevant enough to subjects to evoke defensive attribution in the first place. Undergraduate

college students judged a working stimulus person who was either hitchhiking or jogging alone in a park at night when attacked. Subjects may not have personally identified with the victim and female subjects may not have identified with the situation if they considered jogging in a park at night dangerous. Shaw and McMartin (1977) argue that both personal and situational similarity are required to elicit defensive attribution blaming patterns.

Kanekar et al. (1985) also attempted to separate attributions of behavioral and characterlogical blame. In contrast to Howard, they found that female subjects assigned less characterlogical and more behavioral blame to female victims than male subjects. Although these results are congruent with the present reformulation, the operationalization of key concepts is still problematic. Likelihood of occurrence is considered analogous to behavioral blame. Besides conceptual inconsistency with generally accepted notions of behavioral blame, likelihood estimates elicited after the subject already thinks a crime has taken place are subject to the "hindsight effect": They are inflated when a subject believes the crime did indeed occur (Janoff-Bulman & Timko, 1985). Furthermore, research has shown that women perceive themselves to be at greater risk for crime than men do (Gordon & Riger, 1979; Gordon, Riger, LeBailly & Heath, 1980). As such, the females in Kanekar et al.'s study may have been inclined to give higher likelihood estimates than the males for the scenarios which involved female victims.

Finally, Kanekar et al.'s (1985) characterlogical measure is similar to measures that other authors have used to assess overall blame which includes both behavioral and characterlogical components (Acock & Ireland, 1983; Fincham & Hewstone, 1982; Kahn et al., 1977; Krulewitz & Nash, 1980).

Luginbuhl and Mullin (1981) also offer partial support for the present reformulation. They found that male subjects attributed greater characterlogical blame to a female rape victim than did female subjects, whereas, the female subjects attributed greater blame to the female victim's behavior and chance.

The present study expands the Luginbuhl and Mullin (1981) conditions to include male and female victims in the vignettes to determine if gender-similarity is indeed the factor which evokes personal similarity and the hypothesized blaming pattern. It is surprising to find that only one experimental study has utilized male victims of rape (Howard, 1984) when several authors testify to the prevalence of this crime (Burgess & Holmstrom, 1979; Davis, 1968; Forman, 1982; Goyer & Eddleman, 1984; Groth & Burgess, 1980; Kaufman, Divasto, Jackson, Voorhees, & Christy, 1980; Moss, Hosford, & Anderson, 1979; Sagarin, 1976).

Personal similarity factors other than gender are kept pertinent to subjects by portraying victims who are of approximately the same age (20) and the same occupation (student at St. Bonaventure University) as the subjects. High situational similarity is maintained in all conditions by

depicting a victim who was attacked while performing an activity which pretesting revealed to be a frequent behavior for St. Bonaventure males and females (walking home alone; please see Appendix A for pretest and results).

Finally, the present study will directly assesses behavioral and characterlogical blame so as not to confuse them with likelihood and overall blame (see Appendix B).

Predictions

(1) Female subjects will assign female victims more behavioral and less characterlogical blame than will male subjects.

(2) Male subjects will assign male victims more behavioral and less characterlogical blame than will female subjects.

Method

Pretest

A pretest was administered to twelve males and twelve females from the subject population to provide evidence of a situation that would be likely to induce situational similarity in the vignettes. Of six potential crime situations, walking home alone from a friend's place was identified by the most subjects as a behavior they engage in at a relatively high monthly frequency rate. Therefore, the victim in the vignettes was depicted engaging in this behavior.
(See Appendix A for pretest and results.)

Subjects

Thirty male and 30 female undergraduate students recruited from psychology classes at St. Bonaventure University received

classroom credit for their participation.

Experimental Design

A 2 x 2 between subjects factorial design was employed to test the effect of the independent variables: subject gender and victim gender, plus their interaction, on two dependent measures assessing behavioral and characterlogical blame.

Materials

A vignette describing a rape in the local area with a victim named either John or Sue provided the gender manipulation. (See Appendix B for the vignettes and dependent measures.)

Two written items asking subjects to assign behavioral or characterlogical blame were administered in a randomized counterbalanced order. These dependent measures are contained in Appendix B.

Adjunctive assessment items were administered after the dependent measures. The questions of interest were how much responsibility subjects attributed to chance, and if subjects' previous experience with victimization affected attributions to behavior, character and chance. The adjunctive questions are in Appendix C.

Procedure

Subjects were assigned to conditions of the manipulated variable by randomized-block method. In groups ranging from two to fifteen per session, subjects were told that the experimenter is interested in perceptions of crime in the local area and that they are participating in a preliminary test of materials to be used for a future study. Subjects read the

vignettes, completed the written measures, and were given a written debriefing. (See Appendix D for debriefing.)

Results

The data did not support either of the hypotheses. MANOVA (Barker & Barker, 1984) was used to test the relationship between the two continuous criterion variables (behavioral and characterlogical blame measured on a scale of zero to eight) and the two nominal predictor variables (gender of subject and gender of victim). The multivariate tests did not reach significance (Wilks' Lamba = 0.929, $F(2, 55) = 2.106$, $p > .10$), therefore, the experimenter is not justified in examining the univariate tests since the dependent measures may not be orthogonal.

Analysis of adjunctive data collected revealed some interesting effects. ANOVA was used to test whether subject gender, victim gender or their interaction affects attributions to chance. A significant main effect of victim gender was found: Subjects made significantly greater attributions to chance for crimes involving male victims than for crimes involving female victims, $F(1, 56) = 3.950$, $p < .05$. The means are shown in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here.

It is also interesting to note that in every condition behavioral blame was preferred to characterlogical blame although the differences are not significant. The means are shown in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here.

Finally, MANOVA revealed a significant main effect for the order of administration of the behavioral and characterlogical blame measures, Wilks' Lamba = 0.891, $F(2, 51) = 3.134$, $p < .05$. The univariate analysis showed an effect of order on the behavioral blame measure, $F(1, 52) = 6.017$, $p < 0.05$. When behavioral blame was assessed first, subjects assigned significantly more behavioral blame than when behavioral blame was assessed second ($x = 5.267$ for behavioral-characterlogical order versus $x = 4.1$ for characterlogical-behavioral order).

Discussion

Support was not obtained for the reformulation of defensive attribution theory represented by the proposition that subjects of the same gender as victims would attribute more behavioral and less characterlogical blame to the victims than subjects of the opposite gender.

The fact that in all conditions subjects preferred behavioral to characterlogical blame offers a possible explanation for the failure to support the hypotheses. It may be that when given a choice, people generally prefer to utilize behavioral rather than characterlogical blame regardless of their personal or situational similarity to the victim. Or, the results may simply indicate, contrary to Shaw and McMartin (1977), that only situational similarity is needed to evoke defensive attribution type blaming. Since all subjects in this study were situationally similar to the victims (i.e. students

at the same college of about the same age engaging in an activity with which most students identified), they may have demonstrated protective blaming tendencies by their preference for behavioral blame.

Another possible explanation for the general preference for behavioral over characterlogical blame and the failure to obtain the expected findings is that the written scenarios used to present the crime and manipulate victim gender were biased towards behavioral blame. While several behaviors of the victim are described in the vignettes, no "character" descriptions per se are given. The subjects were expected to infer character from behavior in order to make attributions to character. As such, the experimenter may have unwittingly biased the subjects toward a preference for behavioral attributions.

An order effect for the administration of the two dependent measures may also have contributed to obfuscating any patterns of behavioral and characterlogical blame. Perhaps subjects assigned significantly greater behavioral blame when it was assessed first because this item made them aware of the distinction between the two blame types. Janoff-Bulman (1979) observed that many of her respondents had not distinguished between behavioral and characterlogical blame previous to her asking them to do so.

Finally, the present data yielded a significantly greater attribution to chance for scenarios involving male victims rather than female victims. Since most theories of victim

blaming rest heavily upon the assumption that people resist blaming chance, future studies should continue to measure attributions to chance. If the present pattern of differing attributions to chance depending on victim gender is replicated, it may indicate that people believe rapes against males are random and uncontrollable; whereas, crimes against females can be controlled or explained to some extent by factors other than chance. From another perspective, it may simply be that chance and believability are inversely related in subjects' minds. Howard (1984) found that subjects rated rapes with male victims as less believable than crimes with female victims. Gordon, Riger, LeBailly & Heath (1980) found that females perceive women to be at greater risk for crime than men. Thus, people may consider chance to be more involved in male victim rapes than female victim rapes.

In summary, no support was obtained for a reformulation of defensive attribution based on a distinction between behavioral and characterlogical blame although the general preference for behavioral blame and the adjunctive findings indicate the importance of differentiating between these two blame types and assessing attributions to chance in future studies.

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Appendix A

Pretest Results

Behavior:	total monthly frequency: Males	Females	% of respondents who engage in this behavior: Males	Females
1. walk home alone from the library	104	73	75	67
2. drive into Allegany alone	63	27	75	33
3. drive into Olean alone	77	76	92	50
4. leave door of apartment/ room unlocked	266	143	83	67
5. walk home alone from Fitness Center	29	0	25	0
6. walk alone to or from a friend's	92	81	75	92

Note. Behavior "six" was chosen because of the high monthly tally combined with a high percentage of subjects who state they engage in this behavior at least once in a typical month.

Appendix B

Please read the following account of a crime which took place five years ago and answer the questions which follow.

John (Sue), a 20 year-old Bonaventure student, was walking from a friend's apartment on Main Street in Allegany to his(her) dorm room on campus at approximately 11:30 p.m. on February 12, 1983. Just as he (she) passed the intersection between Union and Seventh Streets, a man of rather large build approached from across the street on the pretext of asking the time. As John (Sue) went to look at his (her) watch, the man grabbed him (her) by the arms and pushed him (her) into the empty lot nearby. As John (Sue) cried out in protest, the man twisted his (her) arms into a painfully contorted position and told John (Sue) that he (she) wouldn't get hurt if he (she) was a "good boy (girl)". John (Sue) was frightened and didn't fight back. The man then raped John (Sue). This was the fifth reported crime incident in the neighborhood in eight weeks.

(1) How much do you think if John (Sue) had acted differently the rape could have been avoided?

Please circle a number below.

0 There is no way that John (Sue) could have changed his (her) actions such that the rape would not have occurred.

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8 John (Sue) could have completely avoided the rape by changing his (her) actions.

(2) How much do you think John (Sue) is the type of person who is likely to get raped?

Please circle a number below.

0 John (Sue) is probably <u>not</u> the type of person who is likely to get raped.

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8 John (Sue) is probably the type of person who is likely to get raped.

(3) What is your gender?

_____male _____female

Appendix C

Adjunctive Measures

(1) Have you ever been a victim of a violent crime like rape?

_____yes _____no

(2) Have you ever been close to someone victimized by rape or sexual assault?

_____yes _____no

(3) Have you ever worked with victims of sexual assault or rape?

_____ yes _____no

(4) How much of a role do you think chance played in precipitating this crime?

Please circle a number below.

0 Chance was not a factor involved in this crime.
1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8 Chance was entirely responsible for this crime.

Appendix D

Debriefing

You have just participated in a study of victim blaming which I am conducting to fulfill the thesis requirement for a master's degree in Psychology here at St. Bonaventure University.

Before you began, I told you that I was testing materials for a future study because I hoped that you would not spend much time trying to figure out my hypotheses while you were reading the crime scenario and answering the questions. Also, since some theoreticians argue that situational similarity to the victim must exist in order for people to blame factors other than chance, I presented the crime scenarios as if they were actual events which took place in the local area five years ago. In fact, the crime accounts which you read were fictitious.

Psychological researchers have discovered that often people tend to blame victims of crime, accident, natural disaster or disease. However, several years of research and hundreds of experiments have failed to elucidate the situations and personal characteristics that are likely to evoke victim blaming reactions. This study is an attempt to explore whether or not the gender of the subject, and the gender of the victim interact to have an impact on victim blaming tendencies.

In order to study the effects of victim gender, I had some of you read an account of a male rape victim and others read about a female rape victim.

I am also especially interested in whether or not males and females tend to assign behavioral, and characterlogical blame differently depending on the gender of the victim.

My hypotheses are:

(1) Female subjects will assign female victims more behavioral and less characterlogical blame than male subjects.

(2) Male subjects will assign male victims more behavioral and less characterlogical blame than female subjects.

I would be happy to discuss this study further with you if you have any questions or concerns. If you would like to see the results of this study or learn more about the research in this area, please contact myself, Catherine Panzarella, or Dr. Pamela McMahon in the Psychology Department (De LaRoche basement, 375-2504).

(Results should be available after May 10, 1988.)

Thank you very much for helping me with this study.

Table 1

Mean Attributions to Chance for Both Genders of Victims and Subjects

	Female Subjects	Male Subjects	Total
Female Victims	4.8	4.267	4.534
Male Victims	5.6	5.467	5.534
Total	5.2	4.867	5.034

Note. The main effect for victim gender is significant at $p < .05$.

Table 2

Attributions to Behavioral and Characterlogical Blame for Both Genders of Victims by Both Genders of Subjects

	Female Subjects		Male Subjects	
	beh	char	beh	char
Female Victims	4.667	4.000	4.667	3.333
Male Victims	4.067	2.467	5.333	4.067

Note. In every case, behavioral blame is preferred to characterlogical blame.